

The Anzac on the Wall

Poem by Jim Brown

I wandered thru a country town 'cos I had time to spare,
And went into an antique shop to see what was in there.
Old bikes and pumps ad kero lamps, but hidden by it all,
A photo of a soldier boy – an Anzac on the Wall.

“The Anzac have a name?” I asked. The old man answered “no,
The ones who could have told me mate, have passed on long ago.
The old man kept on talking and, according to his tale,
The photo was unwanted junk bought from a clearance sale.

“I asked around,” the old man said, “but no one knows his face,
He’s been on that wall twenty years, deserves a better place.
For someone must have loved him so, it seems a shame somehow.”
I nodded in agreement and then said, “I’ll take him now.”

My nameless digger’s photo, well it was a sorry sight
A cracked glass pane and a broken frame – I had to make it right
To prise the photo from its frame I took care just in case,
“Cause only sticky paper held the cardboard back in place.

I peeled away the faded screed and much to my surprise,
Two letters and a telegram appeared before my eyes
The first reveals my Anzac’s name, and regiment of course
John Mathew Francis Stuart – of Australia’s own Light Horse.

This letter written from the front, my interest now was keen

This note was dated August seventh, 1917

“Dear Mum, I’m at Khalasa Springs not far from the Red Sea

They say it’s in the Bible – looks like Billabong to me.

“My Kathy wrote I’m in her prayers she’s still my bride to be

I just can’t wait to see you both you’re all the world to me

And Mum you’ll soon meet Bluey, last month they shipped him out

I told him to call on you when he’s up and about.”

“That bluey is a larrikin, and we all thought it funny

He lobbed a Turkish hand grenade into the Co’s dunny.

I told you how he dragged me wounded in from no man’s land

He stopped the bleeding closed the wound with only his bare hand.”

“Then he copped it at the front from some stray shrapnel blast

It was my turn to drag him in and I thought he wouldn’t last

He woke up in hospital, and nearly lost his mind

Cause out there on the battlefield he’d left one leg behind.”

“He’s been in a bad way mum; he knows he’ll ride no more

Like me he loves a horse’s back he was a champ before.

So Please Mum can you take him in, he’s been like my brother

Raised in a Queensland orphanage he’s never known a mother.”

But Struth, I miss Australia mum, and in my mind each day

I am a mountain cattleman on high plains far away

I’m mustering white-faced cattle, with no camel’s hump in sight

And I waltz my Matilda by a campfire every night

I wonder who rides Billy, I heard the pub burnt down
I'll always love you and please say hooroo to all in town".

The second letter I could see was in a lady's hand
An answer to her soldier son there in a foreign land

Her copperplate was perfect, the pages neat and clean
It bore the date November 3rd, 1917

"T'was hard enough to lose your Dad, without you at the war
I'd hoped you would be home by now – each day I miss you more"

"Your Kathy calls around a lot since you have been away
To share with me her hopes and dreams about our wedding day
And Bluey has arrived – and what a godsend he has been
We talked and laughed for days about the things you've done and seen"

"He really is a comfort, and works hard around the farm,
I read the same hope in his eyes that you won't come to harm.
Mc Connell's kids rode Billy, but suddenly that changed
We had a violent lightning storm, and it was really strange."

"Last Wednesday just on midnight, not a single cloud in sight
It raged for several minutes, it gave us all a fright
It really spooked your Billy – and he screamed and bucked and reared
And then he rushed the sliprail fence, which by a foot he cleared"

"They brought him back next afternoon, but something's changed I fear
It's like the day you brought him home, for no one can get near
Remember when you caught him with his black and flowing mane?
Now Horse breakers fear the beast that only you can tame,"
"That's why we need you home son" – then the flow of ink went dry –

This letter was unfinished, and I couldn't work out why.

Until I started reading the letter number three

A yellow telegram delivered news of tragedy

Her son killed in action – oh – what pain that must have been

The Same date as her letter – 3rd November 17

This letter, which was never sent, became then one of three

She sealed behind the photo's face – the face she longed to see.

And John's hometown's old timers – children when he went to war

Would say no greater cattleman had left the town before.

They knew his widowed mother well – and with respect did tell

How when she lost her only boy, she lost her mind as well.

She could not face the awful truth, to strangers she would speak

“My Johnny's at the war you know, he's coming home next week.”

They all remembered Bluey he stayed on to the end

A younger man with wooden leg became her closest friend

And he would go and find her when she wandered old and weak

And always softly say “yes dear – John will be home next week.”

Then when she died Bluey moved on, to Queensland some did say

I tried to find out where he went, but don't know to this day

And Kathy never wed – a lonely spinster some found odd

She wouldn't set foot in a church – she'd turned her back on God

John's mother left no will I learned on my detective trail

This explains my photo's journey, that clearance sale

So I continued digging cause I wanted to know more

I found John's name with thousands in the records of the war

His last ride proved his courage – a ride you will acclaim

The Light Horse Charge at Beersheba of everlasting fame

That last day in October back in 1917

At 4pm our brave boys fell – that sad fact I did glean

That's when John's life was sacrificed, the record's crystal clear

But 4 pm in Beersheba is midnight over here

So as John's gallant sprit rose to cross the great divide

Were lightning bolts back home a signal from the other side?

Is that why Billy bolted and went racing as in pain?

Because he'd never feel his master on his back again?

Was it coincidental? Same time – same day – same date?

Some proof of numerology, or just a quirk of fate?

I think it's more than that, you know, as I've heard wiser men,

Acknowledge there are many things that go beyond our ken

Where craggy peaks guard secrets neath dark skies torn asunder

Where hoofbeats are companions to the rolling waves of thunder

Where lightning cracks like 303's and ricochets again

Where howling moaning gusts of wind sound just like dying men

Some Mountain cattlemen have sworn on lonely alpine track

They've glimpsed a huge black stallion – Light Horseman on his back.

Yes Sceptics say, it's swirling clouds just forming apparitions

Oh no, my friend you can't dismiss all this as superstition

The desert of Beersheba – or windswept Aussie range

John Stuart rides forever there – Now I don't find that strange

Now some gaze at this photo, and they often question me

And I tell thee a small white lie and say he's family.

"You must be proud of him." They say – I tell them, one and all,

That's why he takes the pride of place – my Anzac on the Wall.

Jim Brown